DESIGN FOR LIVING

Samson DeBrier is a Hollywood original, a man who achieved his fame without having to do anything but be himself

By Anne Thompson

It's no secret that Hollywood is a strange place, full of curiosities and characters. And one of the most fascinating of them is a man in his mid-70s named Samson DeBrier.

Many Hollywood denizens know DeBrier as a pale, elderly man who's a fixture at art- and film-world functions. He inevitably shows up dressed in elegant evening clothes — usually black or maroon — sporting a silk scarf and many gold rings.

But DeBrier is more than a partygoer. He's one of those original Hollywood creatures whose colorful life is a story worth telling not so much because he's made any lasting cultural contribution by painting or writing novels or making films, but because, simply, he's famous for being himself in a town where celebrity is everything. As producer Tony Bill, a friend of DeBrier's, once noted, DeBrier's is the best kind of fame, "because he didn't have to do anything."

Samson DeBrier's life is filled with stories, memories and legends, which may or may not have become embellished over the years. Some people know him as the man who, in the '50s, hosted one of L.A.'s few literary salons, which was attended by Igor Stravinsky, Kurt Weill, Lotte Lenya and other cultural kingpins, as well as by such stars and stars-to-be as James Dean, Jack Nicholson, Suzanne Pleshette and Karen Black, and directors such as Stanley Kubrick and Tony Richardson. Others know him for his reputation as a warlock or male witch. Film buffs recognize him as an actor who, as a teenager, appeared in the infamous silent film "Salome," which starred the Russian lesbian actress Alla Nazimova. To others, he's best-known not for his own fame but for his associations with the famous — the time in his teens, for instance, he went to Paris and fell into a crowd filled with such literary lights as novelists Andre Gide and Gertrude Stein, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau.

Kenneth Anger, the author and filmmaker who shot his "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" at DeBrier's Hollywood bungalow, calls DeBrier "the last individualist." DeBrier, of course, encourages the legends that swirl around him; it is sometimes hard to gauge where the truth begins and ends. He professes to have become bored with the stories that get dragged out the most, such as his close friendship with Gide and the celebrity-studded salon days. "I feel uncomfortable about living on the edges of their celebrity," he says, "that's not my claim to fame."

On a quiet autumn day, we are in DeBrier's shadowy living room, a dusty museum of memorabilia with a gold ceiling, black walls, stained-glass windows and, everywhere, piles of things collected over the years: books, dolls, ashtrays, pillows, knick-knacks, assorted paintings, frayed rugs and lovely Art Nouveau furniture and sculpture. Another DeBrier friend, filmmaker Curtis Harrington, was right when he said that this house was laid out for sensual, and not visual, effect.

Anne Thompson is the West Coast editor of Film Comment magazine.

CHRIS GULKER

"I'm an observer," says DeBrier. "I like to see the effects of things rather than participating."

DeBrier sits in a faded armchair, taps at a cigarette and reaches easily for any clippings, books or artifacts that will enlighten the conversation. When he goes out, he dresses up in rather dandyish costumes, but at home he prefers his oldest, most comfortable clothes. Today he is wearing a navy-blue turtleneck with a large green peridot pendant, soft brown pants and black Chinese slippers. He has light, intelligent eyes set in an inscrutable, classically sculpted face. His white hair is combed toward his face, giving him the appearance of a Roman god or emperor. And, judging from old photos, he hasn't changed much over the years.

DeBrier conducts a house tour. In the foyer there is a wonderful, colorful DeBrier portrait by the artist Oronzo Gasparo, and DeBrier pulls out the green felt hat worn in the painting. Other paintings and photos of him hang on the walls. He pulls out one photo which shows him sitting regally in the nude. "I was 70 when that was taken," he says proudly. Nearby hangs a large portrait of Janis Joplin, painted, DeBrier relates, by a woman named Paige Young, who killed herself after finishing the picture. "I used to call her Page One," says DeBrier. He points to a little library alcove, stuffed with clothes and books. There, behind glass, is his treasured collection of all 13 of the "Yellow Books," a literary quarterly published between 1894 and 1897 which featured stories, poems and illustrations from such contributors as Aubrey Beardsley, Henry James and Max Beerbohm. He also has old copies of the literary magazines The Partisan Review and Transition and a large collection of old books. "My books are the things I love best," he offers.

The bedroom is remarkable, with a bed in the form of the belly of a Chinese dragon. The bathroom is full of stained glass, with hanging beads and an ebony-colored toilet seat and shell-shaped sink. En route to the kitchen that he has turned into a cluttered workroom (where he reads old newspapers because "they are more interesting," has a calendar opened to January 1970, and keeps a rifle under a chair), one passes a Modigliani painting in the hallway, which turns out to be an excellent copy. "It used to be in the kitchen," says DeBrier gleefully. "Dorothy Parker was here once with her husband, Alan (Campbell), and passing by I heard her say, 'He has a Modigliani in his kitchen!' I've been collecting things since I was a kid," he says. "I was the original recycler because I keep using things. The daybed in the corner was my bed when I was a boy. It even has the same mattress." DeBrier keeps lots of pillows around the house, stitched with old pieces of fabric and articles of clothing that will call up a memory or emotion. "Even unpleasant memories enrich your life and teach you lessons and sustain you," he says. "I have pretty much total recall. I've kept a diary since I was 16."

DeBrier's diary, written in longhand on a rag-tag assortment of notebooks and sheaves of paper (one is written on the reverse sides of a message pad), is stuffed into drawers throughout the house. It collects DeBrier's thoughts as his house collects his objects. Curtis Harrington comments that, although DeBrier's identity does not rest, as most artists' do, on any work that he has created, his lasting fame may yet come as a result of his written recollections.

Daily, DeBrier has faithfully recorded everything that has ever happened to him, which is to say a lot. It is all filed away, accessible to his whim: He knows exactly where to find any given entry.

Kenneth Anger, one of many friends who has tried in vain to persuade DeBrier to edit and publish his diary, has read many selections from it. "He's very observant," says Anger. "He sees through other people's fronts and shams. Often in one line he'll sum somebody up in a way that's pithy and accurate and sometimes a little bit cruel and also very funny. The diary is full of humor. He sees life through an aesthetic perspective. The thing that matters most to him is whether something is

In his cluttered Hollywood bungalow, surrounded by memorabilia, Samson DeBrier sits on a daybed, the same one he had as a boy. "I've been collecting things since I was a kid. I was the original recycler because I keep using things."

aesthetically intriguing, or boring."

The problem with publishing the diary, for DeBrier, is that "it was written for me alone. Editing takes time. I have friends who are writers and most of their lives are spent working. I've avoided working all my life. If I sat down and edited it, it would take hours every day when I would just want to go out and look in book shops or read or putter or talk on the phone. I really don't understand how people can get anything done when they work."

During his lifetime, he's "done" plenty, all stories worth telling. According to DeBrier, he was born sometime around 1908 (dates are not his strong suit) in China, but has no birth certificate. His mother, unaware that she was pregnant, had taken off for China by boat and railroad to recover a fortune stashed in Shanghai by her White Russian relatives. Although she reclaimed the fortune, DeBrier says, "I've had a lifetime of guilt thinking about her discomfort. I was about 5 months old when we got home."

DeBrier's father was an Atlantic City political boss who dabbled in real estate. "It was all very corrupt," says DeBrier. "Most of his short life he pursued women. He lived openly with his mistress in a beautiful home away from us most of the time. He died at age 45, stabbed by a woman." DeBrier lived with his mother, brother and sister.

Although he claims never to have been a first-rate student, DeBrier was a precocious child and a voracious reader. As a youth, he fancied the symbolists and decadents, including H.K. Huysmans' bible of decadence, "Against Nature." DeBrier identified with its hero, Des Esseintes, the unremorseful esthete who pursued "unnatural loves and perverse pleasures."

"He was a sensualist in a very unsexual way," DeBrier says. "He was also an observer; he liked to see the effects of things rather than participating. I'm very much like that."

One summer, while in his early teens, DeBrier was befriended by a young entertainer playing the Atlantic City hotels and was invited to join him in Hollywood for the filming of Alla Nazimova's 1922 production of Oscar Wilde's "Salome." The production designer was Rudolph Valentino's second wife, Natasha Rambova, who based her designs on Aubrey Beardsley drawings. According to Kenneth Anger's book "Hollywood Babylon," which DeBrier helped research, the cast was comprised entirely of homosexuals. DeBrier played a young slave, essentially doubling for his entertainer friend, who kept getting too drunk to play his part. "I looked a lot like him, except that I was much younger," says DeBrier. "The picture was not acting; it was a series of articulated poses." DeBrier remembers realizing that Hollywood was not exactly what he thought it would be. "These people you were familiar with were living in simple little cottages, in rather shabby conditions. Not all of them were making that much money or working that frequently. Even a lot of stars lived very modestly. You can pick out almost any one of these houses on the side streets of Hollywood and you can bet a star lived there for a while."

After a 10-day stint as a Hollywood actor, DeBrier returned home to Atlantic City and began a correspondence with the great French writer Andre Gide. "I identified with Sebastian in 'The Counterfeiters,' says DeBrier, "and his green hat." After high school, DeBrier went to Paris and met Gide. "I wore a green suit and hat when I met him," he recalls. DeBrier still has Gide's letters and calling card (indeed, every calling card that ever came his

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The bathroom, another place to stash collectibles: "Even unpleasant memories enrich your life and teach you lessons and sustain you," he says.

way), but shies away from discussing their reportedly intimate relationship.

DeBrier has a picture of himself wearing a fur coat and hat from that period. His face is clear, beautiful and expressionless. "I was 17," he says. "When I left I was 20. I had seven wonderful coats, most of them fur. The café life was the thing. I would sit there and everyone would wonder who I was. I was there three months before I saw Paris in the daytime. When I went to visit Gertrude Stein, I was wearing the coat and hat and she said, 'My, what a wonderful coat, I should have it,' and I said, 'The person who should have the coat has it.' She was really taken aback. She was so spoiled that she really expected me to take my coat off, and Alice B. Toklas winked at me."

"I was a terrible snob. I went to visit James Joyce and wrote my mother that I was shocked that he didn't have a proper dining room. At that age I was not intellectually developed enough to establish an intellectual rapport with the artists and writers I met. In a literary sense, the time was wasted, but years later I realized what the value was. And of course there were the sexual experiences, which were important at that time." When the Depression set in at home, DeBrier felt guilty and returned to America.

After his mother died several years later, DeBrier moved to New York and landed his first job, at a radio station. He hosted a program called "Gangplank" on which he interviewed people going to and from Europe. "At that time I had a very low voice," he says, smiling. "It was very cold and it was usually about 6 a.m. when the boats would arrive. I remember meeting Gloria Vanderbilt and her sister and I was shocked because it was so early and I could smell liquor on their breaths." DeBrier interviewed Thomas Mann, Greer Garson, Sonja Henie and Noel Coward, among others, this way, but when the war came the show was discontinued.

Copyright work was next. "At one time I could tell you the origins of 1,000 songs — who wrote them and who published them," he says. But DeBrier got fed up one day and said to himself, "I've always loved the theater and wonderful creative people and here I am dealing with small people and their small talents — it's all so ugly and banal — and I've got to get out of here." Five years to the day after starting the job, he quit.

After drifting another five years or so, in 1941 DeBrier wound up in California, where he decided to settle and start over. Down to his last $35 and not expecting any income for several months, DeBrier went to work at a Lockheed factory. "I had never really worked with the common man before," he admits, "so it was an extraordinary experience. I'd always been intimidated by them. That experience made me grow up in a hurry emotionally, and I learned to have more confidence in myself. I would work the night shift, come home, shower and dress and take the bus downtown to the May Co., where I worked in the book department on weekends and one weekday, just to accumulate money." After proving to himself that he could compete in the workplace — he was promoted to foreman of the yard — he quit, exactly two years from the day he began.

G. MARIANI, PARIS

DeBrier in a photo portrait taken in Paris in 1929. Gertrude Stein admired the fur coat and hat he wore and suggested that he give the ensemble to her.

DeBrier then returned to his favorite pasttime: collecting things. "Los Angeles used to be wonderful," he says. "You could go over to North Hollywood and meander very slowly in your car and be very pokey and practically stop in the middle of the street. They had wonderful shops with wonderful things in them, very inexpensive. It was almost an aesthetic thing to be able to go slowly and track down places that were full of treasures." During this period, DeBrier bought the 80-year-old gabled Georgian House in central Hollywood that is still his residence. He has always, however, rented out the main house and chooses to live in the little bungalow in back.

After a year not working, DeBrier decided he wanted to do something for humanity. He passed a "help wanted" sign on a local veteran's hospital and accepted an attendant's job there. His reply to those who warned the job would be nerve-wracking and dangerous was, "I've lived among creative people all my life and I'm used to psychotics," and, in fact, he was soon in charge of the shock-therapy wards. "I had more trouble keeping the attendants in line than the patients," he remembers. DeBrier found the job fascinating and stayed five years — to the day.

That was in 1951, and after that DeBrier never worked another day in his life. Extremely frugal, he lives on his savings, some independent income and the rent money from the front house.

While he was working in the hospital, DeBrier became involved in gay rights causes after a friend was involved in a disturbing incident. The friend, a hospital aide, was followed home from a bar and brutalized by vice-squad cops. "It was a matter of injustice," says DeBrier. Although he stresses that he shuns political activism as a rule ("It's up to the individual to make his own place in the world"), he nevertheless became a founding member of the legal chapter of the Mattachine Society, the first gay liberation organization.

"It appealed to me because it was bizarre and it was an adventure. After a while, it palled. (But) the people were sincere about what they wanted to do," he says, but adds he feels strongly about not being identified with any particular sexual persuasion. "I don't consider myself a sexually oriented person," he says.

Back to shopping and perusing bookstores, DeBrier re-entered the art world, attending readings and openings. It was a lively, intellectually fertile time in underground Hollywood, in which "young artists of all kinds, making films without money, (were) doing pottery and weaving, painting, engraving and sculpture," as Anaïs Nin described it in her fifth diary.

Filmmaker Kenneth Anger remembers his first meeting with DeBrier: "I was still in Bevery Hills High School at the time. I gave a reading of a script of a film I wanted to do, called 'Various Pleasures,' at a bookshop on Highland Avenue. People came from the film and art worlds. Samson was among them." DeBrier adds, "Kenneth told me I was to be the lead in the film. Another five years passed and we corresponded and I did research for the book he

was writing, "Hollywood Babylon." Suddenly Kenneth came back one day and I had just had this room redone. My friend, Betty Vaughn, had put up the gold ceiling and painted a mural at the end of the room. Kenneth looked around and said, 'I'm going to make the film here.' "

Curtis Harrington was also in the film, and remembers that it was inspired in part by a "Come as Your Madness" party given by romantic surrealist painter Renate Druks on Halloween in 1953. "She was a close friend of Anaïs Nin. I dressed at the party as Cesare in 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.' That's how I appeared in the film 'Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome.' The film evolved way beyond the original impetus of the party and became a concept." Kenneth Anger recalls the filming: "We were working weekends for three months. The film was my psychological and poetic portrait of Samson DeBrier. It's his fantasy of having different lives. A lot of the costumes came from his drawers; he has collections of materials, brocades and lamés which he has had since he was a child. He played six parts, including Shiva, various gods and goddesses, and the Great Beast, the avatar of Aleister Crowley. I wanted the hero to be a little like the hero of "Against Nature." My film is slightly in that mood, but tongue-in-cheek. I couldn't really afford to build sets, and Samson's house was a little wonderland — he was the pièce de résistance of the whole thing."

Both Anaïs Nin, who also starred in the film (wearing little more than a silver bird cage on her head), and DeBrier recorded their colorful experiences in their respective diaries. DeBrier's account was published in a 1979 issue of Film Culture.

Many of the characters and symbols used in "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" were related to the worlds of the occult and magic, especially Aleister Crowley's "Magick." DeBrier, Anger and the painter Cameron, also in the movie, were all avid Crowleyites and dabbled in the black arts. "Samson has spiritual instincts," suggests Anger, "which you might call like a warlock or witch, but it's occultism, the serious study of the hidden way in which everything works." This apparently led to gossip that he practices witchcraft, although DeBrier himself is very reserved on the subject, referring to whatever power he utilizes as "it."

"I employ it when I have to resort to drastic measures. Usually I don't. I keep it in reserve. It's very absorbing. It takes an enormous amount of energy, which I need for other things, like staying alive. It's a very depleting process. I don't consider myself a warlock, although most other people do." When Esquire ran a 1970 story on Los Angeles witches that featured DeBrier, he claims he put a curse on the editor who ran his picture with the article. "He had a nervous breakdown," DeBrier adds, smiling.

When actor Jack Nicholson referred to DeBrier's salon in a 1973 Playboy interview, he called DeBrier a "male witch" and remembered the place fondly as a place where people played tarot cards before it was chic. DeBrier's decade of wonderful evenings started around 1959, when screenwriter/producer Stanley Shapiro began dropping by with friends, who brought other friends. "All sorts of people came from all walks of life, from all occupations, and mingled there," says Curtis Harrington, one of the early habitués. "It was a kind of intellectual salon, which we just don't have in this town anymore, and, except for the legendary Sacha Viertel's, have never had. One was likely to run into an explorer from Africa, an aging movie queen or a stockbroker. It wasn't 'God, the celebrities.' You never quite knew who might be there."

One unique feature was that no food was served — and no drugs were permitted. "Samson never provided anything except water," says Harrington. People would start arriving after 10 p.m. and often wouldn't leave until dawn. From 10 to 25 people would be there. About once a month, DeBrier would host a party for 100 people. "I don't know how they all fitted in," he says. "I had less furniture then."

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DeBrier in his kitchen workroom, where he writes letters and reads old newspapers "because they are more interesting."

Harrington remembers that "during that period Samson would change his clothes several times in an evening. It was always fascinating to see what he would appear in. One outfit was something out of the Renaissance, with a great ruff, a sort of cross between a clown and Pierrot. He still dresses in a most unusual way, but doesn't change his clothes as often."

DeBrier accounts for the salon's success: "They talked to each other because it was a small house. A lot of these people knew each other, or knew their reputations, or had met each other many times, but had somehow never gotten together except in here. From that came many collaborations and love affairs and marriages. It was a benign atmosphere and I think they were charmed, intrigued."

DeBrier seems to have been one of those catalysts for artists, a medium for others' creativity. Artists gave him paintings, which totally cover the walls, in very different styles. Several writers, including Stanley Shapiro, Joanna Crawford and Richard Lamparski, have dedicated books to him.

Tired of the salon after a decade of party-hosting, DeBrier wanted some peace and solitude, resenting the nightly intrusion into his home. Drugs, a forbidden element, had started appearing on his turf. "People on dope are so silly and boring, no matter how talented they are," he says.

As the day wanes and the shadows in the living room become impenetrable, it is time for DeBrier's afternoon nap. He takes one every day promptly at 5, which enables him to stay up all night, till 3 or 4, if necessary. He accounts for his longevity and health by his having never drunk alcohol, not inhaling his cigarettes, and eating natural foods cooked plainly.

DeBrier continues to stay in touch with the world, driving his battered white Datsun to the many screenings, openings and literary readings, sometimes covering as many as three parties at night. Although he finds most parties dull, he always carries the hope that he will meet some new, interesting person, although most of the time he doesn't. Marysa Maslansky, a photographer's agent and one of the many beautiful women who have been DeBrier's escorts over the years, says "nobody would dream of giving a party without Samson. Everybody knows him, and he knows everybody."

But in spite of DeBrier's inveterate partygoing, he remains primarily a solitary man who spends most of his time puttering in his bungalow and writing his diary. A 1977 entry reads:

"Sitting on back porch — full sun — opening several little purses "left" me by Betty, three little pen knives — various odds and ends of junk jewelry — loose stones, pearls and beads. Realize — I have similar small collections in little boxes, bowls, etc. And they lie there and will provoke similar cynical thoughts when discovered after I'm dead. Will they be at all cherished — even for a moment — these pathetic, useless mementos?" ■

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